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A Longitudinal Analysis of Structural Paradigms in Indian School Education: From Colonial Foundations to The National Education Policy 2020

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Abstract

This research is administered to investigate the longitudinal structural transformations of the Indian school education system. The structure of school education in India has experienced significant transformations across historical phases, from the Gurukul system to colonial influences and post-independence reforms, reflecting shifts in political ideologies, socio-economic priorities and pedagogical paradigms. The structure of school education plays a critical role in shaping learners' cognitive, social and emotional development. India's traditional 10+2 system has long been criticized for its rigidity and lack of alignment with developmental stages of children. The introduction of National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 emerges as a paradigm shift toward a more holistic and flexible framework, represented by the 5+3+3+4 structure. By tracing the history of educational structures through successive commissions, committees, and national policies, this review study gives an outline of the structural changes in school education from the British colonial period to the present day. Special emphasis is given on differentiating the previous educational framework from the newly introduced National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, highlighting the significant paradigm shifts occurring in contemporary Indian education. This paper critically examines the transition from the existing 10+2 educational structure to the new pedagogical and curricular structure. The study highlights key differences in stages, age groups, pedagogical approaches, and intended learning outcomes. Through a comparative and analytical approach, the paper evaluates how these structural shifts aim to address issues such as access, equity, quality, and employability. The findings suggest that while the NEP 2020 represents a progressive and learner-centered transformation, its successful implementation depends on systematic readiness, teacher training, and infrastructural support. Findings also indicate that while previous structures prioritized administrative uniformity and colonial utility, the new paradigm emphasizes cognitive development stages, early childhood care, and vocational integration. This paper aims to analyze the structural changes systematically, tracing their historical roots, evaluating their objectives, and assessing their implications for the future of education in India. Ultimately, this review paper serves as a comprehensive roadmap for scholars and policymakers to understand the evaluation of structural changes in Indian school education.

Keywords: *Indian Education System, NEP 2020, Structural Changes, Educational Framework, Historical Roots, Paradigm Shifts, Future of Education Ind*

1. Introduction

Education is a dynamic and evolving system that reflects the socio-cultural and economic priorities of a nation. The education system of any nation is its primary engine for socio-economic mobility. In the context of India- a nation characterized by its immense geographical diversity and demographic complexity, the structure of education is not merely a static arrangement of schooling years, it is a reflection of its shifting priorities of the 19th 20th and 21 centuries.

As identified in this study, an effective educational structure must fulfill three primary, non-negotiable functions to ensure the success of the leaming ecosystem:

- Support: This refers to the organizational and physical infrastructure that provides the necessary resources, trained faculty, facilities to the learner.
- Contain: the structure acts as a vessel for the national curriculum ensuring that the standardized knowledge base is contained & delivered consistently across the thousands of blocks and villages.
- Protect: the structure safeguards the leaks and the integrity of the educational process from external socio-economic volatility, political shifts, and market pressures.

The structure of school education in India has undergone massive transformations over the centuries. In ancient times, India relied on the traditional 'Gurukul System of Education.' The foundation for the modern school education system was later introduced by Lord T.B. Macaulay in the 1830s. Today, the framework of school education in India can be analyzed from two distinct perspectives: **academic** and **organizational**. To adjust this structure to the changing needs and aspirations of the people, India has established several successive committees and commissions and educational policies. The purpose of this paper is to **identify these structural changes, describe the step-wise evolution of the system, and draw a clear distinction between the existing structure and the newly proposed frameworks.**

2. Structure of School Education in the British Period:

During the period of Crown rule, pre-independent India underwent several foundational structural changes to its educational system, primarily driven by two major commissions:

Hunter Educational Commission (1882-83):

- **Organizational Change:** The control of primary education was decentralized and transferred to district and municipal boards.
- **Academic Change:** Secondary education was bifurcated into two distinct streams: **Literary education** and **Practical education.**

Saddler University Commission (1917-19):

- **Organizational Change:** This commission recommended the establishment of boards specifically for secondary and intermediate education.
- **Academic Change:** It introduced a 12-year school course and stipulated that students should enter the university after an intermediate examination rather than immediately following matriculation.

Wardha Scheme of Basic Education (1937):

It focused on providing **free and compulsory education** for 8 years for children aged 6–14.

Sargent Plan of Education (1944):

- It proposed universal, free, and mandatory primary education for two age groups: **6–11 (junior basic)** and **11–14 (senior basic)**.
- It advocated for the abolition of the intermediate course and the division of high school into **Academic** and **Vocational** streams.

3. Structural Evolution in the Post-Independence Period

Following independence, Indian education progressed phenomenally through various successive educational policies and commissions.

3.1. Early Post-Independence Commissions:

The University Education Commission (1948-49)

The first education commission after independence known as **'Radhakrishnan Commission'** recommended the **10+2+3 educational structure**, adapting the earlier **Calcutta University Commission's concepts.**

Secondary Education Commission (1952-53)

The secondary education commission known as **Mudaliar commission** focused heavily on re-organizing secondary education. It proposed that **secondary education should last for 7 years,** targeting children aged 11 to 17. The commission suggested **ending the intermediate college system, merging class 11 with secondary schools, and class 12 with the B.A. degree.** It also introduced a three-year degree course and a one-year pre-university course for high school students entering university.

3.2. Standardization and National Policies:

The Education Commission (1964-66)/Kothari Commission

This was a landmark commission that introduced a uniform educational pattern across the country: the **10 + 2 + 3 structure.** It established that general education should last for 10 years (structured as 4 + 3 + 3) in which primary education should be 7 or 8 years, and the graduate course should be 3 years.

National Policy on Education (NPE) -1968

This policy reaffirmed the **10 + 2 + 3 educational structure.** It emphasized free and compulsory education for all children up to the age of 14 and highlighted the need to increase facilities for technical and vocational education at the secondary stage.

Draft NPE 1979

It proposed an alternative **8 + 4 + 3 educational structure.** It recommended a **12-year school system** consisting of **8 years of free and compulsory primary education** followed by 4 years of secondary education encompassing both **general and vocational aspects.**

(Note on Educational Patterns Introduced): Ultimately, patterns such as **4 + 4 + 3 or 5 + 3 + 3 (**resulting in 11 years of schooling before intermediate) and **5 + 3 + 4** (12 years of schooling after intermediate) were debated before finalizing the standard.

4. The Existing School Education System

Prior to the most recent reforms, the administration and monitoring of education relied heavily on the Central Advisory Board of Education (CABE), established in 1935. A pivotal shift occurred with a **constitutional amendment in 1976**, which moved education to the **Concurrent List**, making it a joint responsibility of the central and state governments.

4.1. Academic Structure:

The academic framework was heavily based on the **Education Commission (1964-66),** adhering to the rigid 10+2 structure. This system consists of four defined levels:

(i) Lower Primary (I to V)
(ii) Upper Primary (VI to VIII)

(iii) Secondary (IX to X)
(iv) Higher Secondary (XI to XII)

The curriculum is delivered through three primary streams of administration: T**he Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE), the Indian Certificate of Secondary Education (ICSE)**, and the **individual Departments of Education for each state.**

4.2. Organizational Structure:

The organizational structure of the school education system in India follows a **multi-tier hierarchy** designed to manage education from the **national level down to individual villages**. This structure is divided into two primary segments: the Central Level and the State/Local Level.

4.2.1. Central Level Administration:

The **Ministry of Education (earlier the Ministry of Human Resource Development)** is responsible for making policies, educational development in our Country. Specifically, the Department of School Education and Literacy deals with the areas of Secondary School Education. This Ministry is **headed** by a **cabinet minister** called the **Education Minister** where followed by **two State ministers,** who are advised at the official level by the **Secretary to the Department** and assisted by an **Additional Secretary and Educational Advisor** on academic and policy matters of Education. The Department of School Education consists of several bureaus, each headed by the **Joint Secretary**. They are assisted by **Directors, Deputy Secretaries**. This department helps and advises the government in matters relating to formulation and implementation of policies and programmes in the field of education. To facilitate the process of educational development in India and to strengthen the relationship between the Central Government and the State Government in planning, implementation and coordination of educational programmes, the Central Government has set up some All India Forums like **Central Advisory Board of Education (CABE).** At the national level, the **Ministry of Education** oversees the general policy direction for the country. Key bodies that support this mission include:

- **NCERT (National Council of Educational Research and Training):** The apex academic body responsible for developing the National Curriculum Framework (NCF) and publishing standardized textbooks.
- **CBSE (Central Board of Secondary Education):** A national-level board of education that conducts examinations (like Class 10 and 12) and affiliates schools across India and abroad.
- **Specialized Schools:** This includes **KVS** (Kendriya Vidyalaya Sangathan) for central government employees' children and **NVS** (Navodaya Vidyalaya Samiti) for gifted rural students.
- **NIOS (National Institute of Open Schooling):** Provides flexible and distance education for students who cannot attend formal schooling.

4.2.2. State and Local Level Chain of Command:

Education is a "Concurrent" subject, meaning both the central and state governments have roles. **State & Local Level o**perates through a **chain of command.**

It can be seen that at the state level, the **Education Minister** is at the **top of the school education structure**. Under him is the Secretariat. **The administrative head of the Secretariat** is the **Secretary (an IAS officer),** who is directly answerable to the Minister for policy making and its execution at the school level. He is assisted by Joint or Deputy Secretaries. States also have a **Directorate of Education** for different sectors of education like Elementary, Secondary and Higher Secondary Education. The **Director** is the **executive head of the Directorate** and the Director is assisted by Joint Directors, Assistant Director and Deputy Directors.

MINISTRY OF EDUCATION

↓

SECRETARIAT

↓

DIRECTORATE

↓

SCERT / BOARD OF EDUCATION / TEXT BOOK BOARD

↓

REGIONAL OFFICES

↓

DISTRICT EDUCATION OFFICE / ZILLA PARISHAD / DIET

↓

MUNICIPAL OFFICES / BLOCK EDUCATION OFFICES

↓

VILLAGE EDUCATION COMMITTEE / GRAM PANCHAYAT

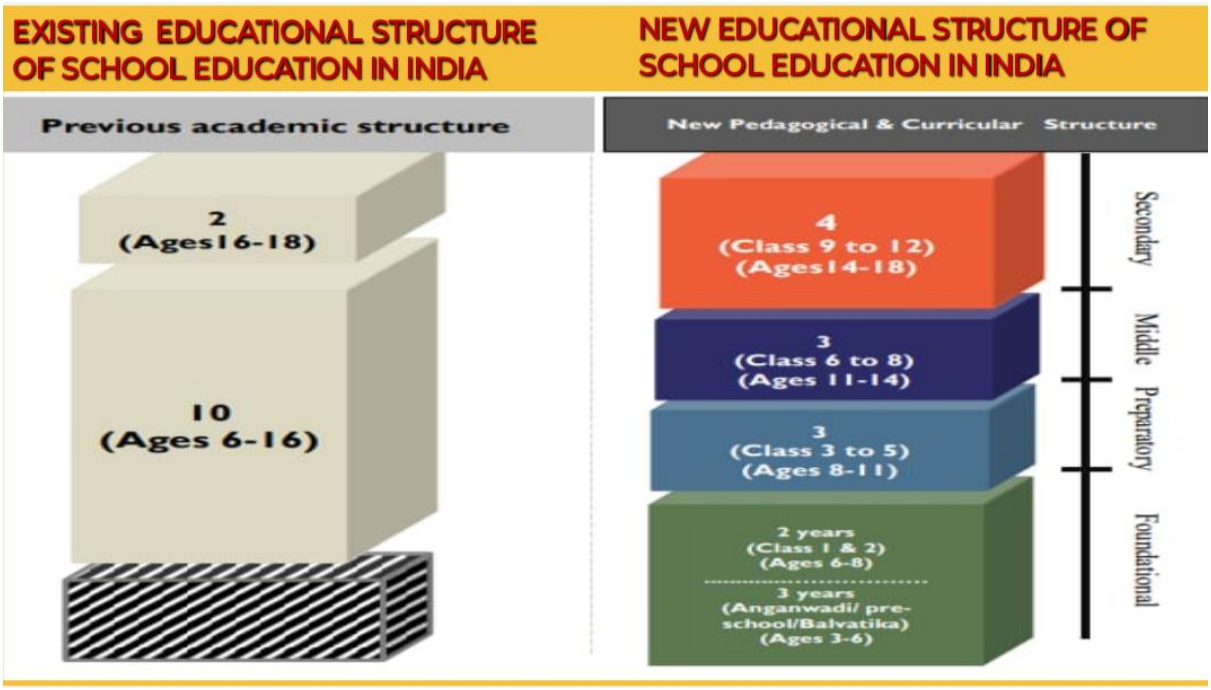
States are divided into **Regional or Circle offices** on the basis of proximity of districts. Each region or circle is under the charge of a **Circle Education Officer.** Circle Education Officer looks after the schools in his/her circle with the help of **District Education Officers. School Inspectors or Block Education Officers** are in charge of specific geographical regions. All the states in India do not have the same administrative structure. In some states, there is a two-tier administrative setup i.e. the **State Department of Education** and **District Education Officer**,while in other states, there might be an intermediary setup between the Department and District level.

Local bodies

In India, school at elementary level and sometimes, at secondary level are also being managed by various local bodies like Municipal Boards, District bodies, Zilla Panchayats and Village Panchayats. In such schools, financial obligations are shared by local taxes as well as grants from the state government, but the management, teacher and staff appointment and infrastructural development are done by the local bodies.

5. The Paradigm Shift introduced by National Education Policy (NEP) 2020:

The implementation of NEP 2020 marks a radical structural departure from the past. The policy fundamentally replaces the rigid **10+2 academic structure** with a flexible, developmentally appropriate **5+3+3+4 structure**.


EXISTING EDUCATIONAL STRUCTURE OF SCHOOL EDUCATION IN INDIA
NEW EDUCATIONAL STRUCTURE OF SCHOOL EDUCATION IN INDIA
Previous academic structure
New Pedagogical & Curricular Structure
2 (Ages16-18)
10 (Ages 6-16)
4 (Class 9 to 12) (Ages14-18)
3 (Class 6 to 8) (Ages 11-14)
3 (Class 3 to 5) (Ages 8-11)
2 years (Class 1 & 2) (Ages 6-8)
3 years (Anganwadi/ pre-school/Balvatika) (Ages 3-6)
Secondary
Middle
Preparatory
Foundational

5.1. The New Pedagogical and Curricular Structure under NEP 2020, schooling is divided into four stages:

Foundational Learning (5 Years):
This initial stage comprises 3 years of pre-school/Anganwadi/Balvatika (ages 3-6) followed by 2 years in Class I & II (ages 6-8). This stage strongly recommends that reading and writing be given primary attention.

- It also focuses on play-based and activity-based learning to support critical cognitive, social, and emotional development in early childhood.

Preparatory Schooling (3 Years): This stage covers Class III to V (ages 8-11).

- It builds upon the foundational years by blending play with more structured academic learning.
- It emphasizes language development, foundational literacy and numeracy, and early subject exploration through interactive classroom experiences.

Middle Stage (3 Years): It covers Class VI to VIII (ages 11-14).

- It focuses on critical learning objectives, conceptual understanding, and experiential learning.
- At this stage, students are introduced to more abstract concepts across subjects and are encouraged to build critical thinking, analytical, and problem-solving skills.

Secondary Education (4 Years): This stage covers Class IX to XII (ages 14-18).

- It is marked as the final and most flexible phase of school education.
- It encourages multidisciplinary learning, allowing students to choose subjects across disciplines and move away from rigid stream-based choices. This stage aims to reduce board exam pressure by redesigning assessments for comprehensive and holistic evaluation.

This NEP revised education framework offers a restructured approach toward transforming the learning experience in schools. This is making education more aligned with real-world skills, personalized to student needs, and capable of nurturing well-rounded learners ready for higher education and beyond.

5.2. Core Objectives of NEP 2020:

Beyond structural realignment, NEP 2020 aims to:

- Provide **universal access to education for all students.**
- Introduce **vocational courses directly into the school curriculum** to increase student employability.
- Emphasize the **holistic development** of students, redesigning the curriculum accordingly.
- Focus heavily on **Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE),** including specialized training for Anganwadi workers and Kindergarten teachers.
- Provide **subject flexibility**, allowing students to choose classes based on interest rather than sticking to a rigid traditional stream (e.g., Arts, Science, Commerce).

6. Conclusion

The primary functions of any educational structure are to **support, contain, and protect the learning ecosystem**. Over many decades, India has utilized these structures to drive massive social progress, evidenced by the **national literacy rate increasing** from a mere **18% in 1951 to 73% as of 2011.** The evolution of Indian school education, heavily influenced by colonial beginnings and refined by subsequent post-independence commissions, has culminated in the National Education Policy 2020. Moving from the fragmented systems of the British era, through the standardized **10+2** system of the Kothari Commission, and finally into the progressive **5+3+3+4** pedagogical structure, the education system of India has evolved gradually yet phenomenally, equipping itself to meet modern global and domestic demands. The longitudinal investigation of the Indian school education system reveals a profound evolution from the holistic, teacher-centric **Gurukul system** to a centralized **colonial model** designed for administrative utility, and finally to the contemporary reformative era. The study confirms that while the long-standing **10+2 structure** provided a necessary post-independence framework for uniformity, it eventually became a rigid barrier to developmental alignment and creative flexibility.

The introduction of the **National Education Policy (NEP) 2020** and its **5+3+3+4 structure** represents more than just a structural change; it is a fundamental **paradigm shift** toward a learner-centered, multi-disciplinary, and developmentally appropriate pedagogical model. This new framework successfully addresses the historical neglect of **Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE)** and the artificial silos between vocational and academic streams. However, the findings emphasize that the transition from a legacy of "administrative uniformity" to "cognitive development" is not automatic. The success of this structural transformation is contingent upon:

- **Systematic Readiness:** Moving beyond performative metrics to ensure genuine pedagogical autonomy.
- **Teacher Empowerment:** Rigorous professional training to transition from rote-based instruction to experiential learning.
- **Infrastructural Equity:** Bridging the digital and physical resource divide to ensure that structural flexibility translates into quality education for all socio-economic strata.

Ultimately, this research serves as a roadmap, illustrating that while the **NEP 2020** provides the theoretical blueprint for a modern, inclusive, and globally competitive system, its true impact will be measured by the consistency of its **grassroots implementation** and its ability to reconcile India's rich educational heritage with 21st-century demands.

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